

Team Up for 21st Century Teaching and Learning

*What Research and Practice
Reveal about Professional Learning*

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Condensed Excerpts

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Introduction to Learning Teams

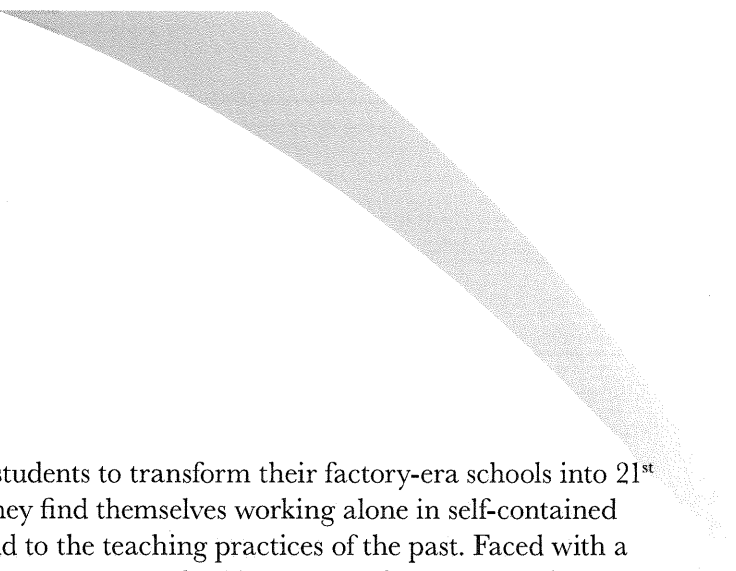
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Learning is no longer preparation for the job, it *is* the job. In a world in which information expands exponentially, today's students must learn to be knowledge navigators, seeking and finding information from multiple sources, evaluating it, making sense of it, understanding how to turn information into knowledge and knowledge into action. Among their myriad sources of information are knowledgeable others—peers, experts, families, and teachers. And, while it has long been acknowledged that learning is socially constructed through interaction with these knowledgeable others (Rogoff 1998), today's web of instant and nearly ubiquitous communication means that social learning skills are ever more possible and essential. Today's students are deeply immersed in these various and ever expanding learning environments.

What does this mean for teachers? First, as learners themselves, they can and should be constantly learning with and from their knowledgeable colleagues. They can and should model for their students the collaborative learning and knowledge construction that is at the core of 21st century competencies. But the reality is that the prevalent model of schooling today supports neither continuous job-embedded learning for teachers nor collaborative learning among teachers. Education is frequently fragmented and disconnected: professional development is not aligned with student and teacher needs, curriculum is not aligned with assessment, and standards are not aligned with curriculum. This fragmentation prevents any substantial education reform from taking place because changes in one area do not affect another. Collaborative teaching could bridge these gaps, but the reality is that today's teachers work alone—they spend an average of 93% of their official workday working in isolation from their colleagues, and more if one counts the hours of preparation and grading spent after school hours (MetLife 2009).

Too often teachers' personal learning and professional development is also isolated from their practice. Their officially sanctioned and supported learning opportunities are typically decided for them, in externally mandated professional development delivered in "drive-by workshops" designed for the mass, not for the individual teacher (NSDC 2009). They rarely have the opportunity to share their practice, reflect on what works or doesn't work with colleagues and other knowledgeable experts. They have few opportunities to collaborate with their colleagues to build an understanding of the learners in their charge or to create a curriculum progression that links their efforts to improve student achievement. Today's young teachers are especially eager to

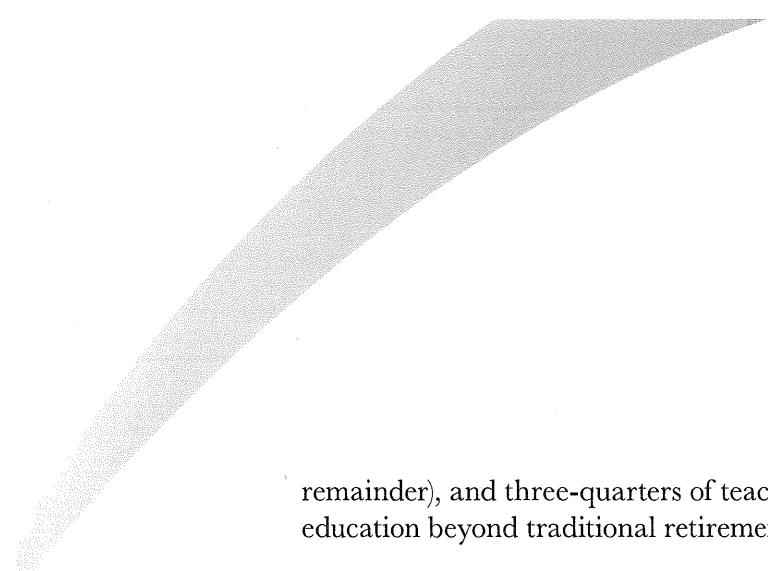


work with their colleagues and students to transform their factory-era schools into 21st century learning centers. But, they find themselves working alone in self-contained classrooms where they are bound to the teaching practices of the past. Faced with a choice between working in the last century or the 21st century, these new teachers are voting with their feet. The young people we are counting on to teach for the future are leaving our obsolete schools at an alarming rate.

America's teaching force is in constant churn. New teachers come and go at ever increasing rates—the turnover among beginning teachers grows every year—and increased 40% over the last 16 years (NCTAF 2010). We have institutionalized high turnover and teacher attrition. The impacts on high need schools are most dramatic, but the problem occurs all across the education landscape. The reasons teachers give for leaving speak to the impacts of isolation: lack of support, lack of influence, classroom intrusions, and inadequate time to collaborate (NCTAF 2003). Up to 46% of teachers leave their classrooms within the first five years of teaching. This turnover at the front end of teaching, combined with an ever greater percentage of teachers reaching retirement age, means that the experience level of teachers in schools today has dropped radically. In 1987-1988 the modal number of years of teaching experience in schools was 15 years, in 2007-2008 it was one year (that's right, one year!) (NCTAF 2010). With up to 54% of the teaching force made up of Baby Boomers due to retire in the next decade, we face a school staffing tsunami if we do not change the overall design of teaching (NCTAF 2010).

We can't just keep recruiting new teachers at the front end of the pipeline and expect they will stay. Because the turnover rate among young teachers is so high, the traditional practice of hiring new teachers, fresh out of college, does not provide a reliable solution to teacher shortages. "The relative odds of young teachers departing are 184% higher than for middle-aged teachers" (Ingersoll 2001, p. 17). Teacher turnover at any stage in the career is not a benign occurrence. According to NCTAF's national study on the financial cost of teacher turnover, the national cost of recruiting, hiring and retaining replacement teachers is over \$7 billion a year (NCTAF 2007).

But along with this mountain of bad news comes a great opportunity to change the education system in the United States to meet the needs of 21st century learners. The 2009 *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher* found that teachers are eager to team up in new roles. The survey found that teachers who are very satisfied with their careers are more likely to work in schools with higher levels of collaboration. Thirty-seven percent of teachers also say that they would be interested in a "hybrid role" (teaching in the classroom part-time while filling other roles in the school or district during the

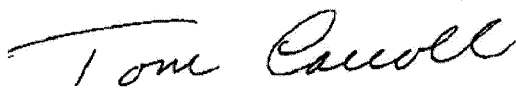


remainder), and three-quarters of teachers believe that they will continue to work in education beyond traditional retirement in mentoring or coaching (MetLife 2009).

There is a pressing need for the nation's teachers to "transform their personal knowledge into a collectively built, widely shared, and cohesive professional knowledge base" to meet the needs of the Learning Generation (Chokshi and Fernandez 2005). Learning Teams make this possible. We have an opportunity to capitalize on the changing workforce to create intergenerational leaning teams that will provide new opportunities for collaboration among novice teachers and their accomplished colleagues. These learning teams would also establish a new pathway for Baby Boomers in government and industry who are eager to pursue encore careers in which they can give back to the next generation of youth without necessarily becoming a teacher of record (NCTAF 2009). The mentoring and support that learning teams, especially with the participation of retirees, provide for new and struggling teachers could reduce their isolation and their frustration with the shortcomings of stand-alone practice, and significantly increase retention rates.

Learning teams can stop the flow of beginning teachers out the door, create new roles for experienced teachers, and provide a way for schools to capitalize on the expertise and interest of retiring Baby Boomers. These claims move beyond a theory and have been proven by researchers in the field. NCTAF, with the support of the Pearson Foundation, is presenting both research studies to ground this theory, as well as case studies that demonstrate the power learning teams have to change the lives of today's teachers. The research reports and case studies in this book demonstrate that collaborative teams positively affect the rewards of teaching career, they improve instructional practice, enhance teaching effectiveness, and increase student achievement.

It is time to support schools where teamwork begins with systematic induction of new teachers into professional learning communities, and continues with support network of educators, who sustain their growth through professional development that is embedded in the day-to-day fabric of work in the school. It is time to develop learning teams that embed continuous professional development in schools that are constantly evolving to meet the needs of today's students. **It's time to team up for 21st century teaching and learning!**



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Synthesis of the Research Findings

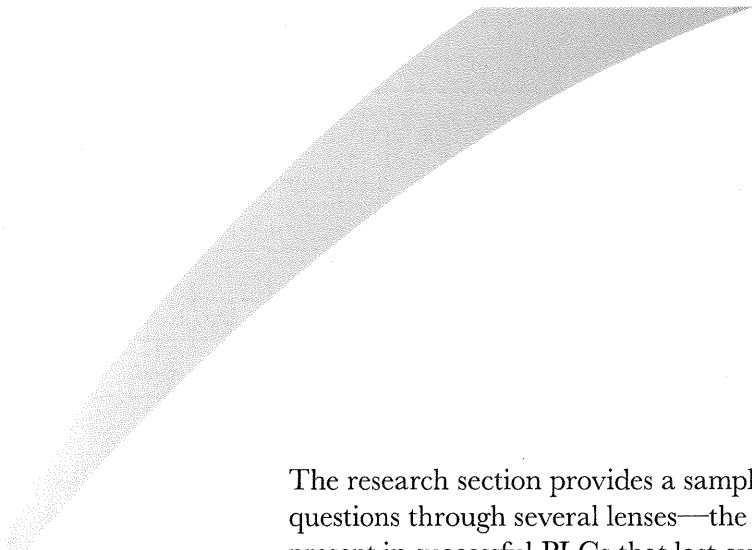
Transforming American education is the rallying cry heard through the land today. The Obama Administration focused the nation's vision for 2020 on two basic goals: assuring that every student is college and career ready, and closing the achievement gap for low-income students and children of color.

These are ambitious goals. Making it happen will require changes that go beyond tinkering with today's school designs. Curriculum, assessment, and instructional practices designed in the past are simply not adequate to meet these goals. The most critical redesign will be that of the teaching profession—the work of teachers and the way schools are staffed. The era of isolated teachers, working alone to meet the myriad needs of all their students, is neither educationally effective nor economically viable in the 21st century.

Just giving today's students a better factory-era school, with teachers delivering text-based instruction in stand-alone classrooms won't prepare them for the 21st century. Freeing teachers from their isolation with productive collaboration is the goal of what are variously called: communities of practice, teacher collaborative communities, learning teams, professional learning networks, or, most commonly, professional learning communities.

Over the last several decades, there have been hundreds of books, articles, conference presentations and web blogs about professional learning communities. Despite the fact that discussion and advocacy of these communities is “no longer unusual or controversial” and may “soon be as accepted a part of school life as notebooks, performance evaluations, and good old fashioned chalk” (Hargreaves 2007, p. 175) their effectiveness is not widely known.

Researchers have been looking for answers to these important questions: What makes for an effective learning community of educational professionals? What do we mean by effective: is it changes in pedagogy – the ways teachers teach – or growth in their knowledge of content in their subject areas; or both? More satisfied teachers and stable school communities? Or is the only metric that matters the “gold standard” of measurable gains in student achievement? To answer any one of these questions definitively would require far more than is attempted in this publication. Instead, we aim here to shed light on the impact of professional learning communities from an integrative perspective, one that draws on each of these important and likely symbiotic outcomes. We draw on two equally valid sources of knowledge—published research and skilled practice.

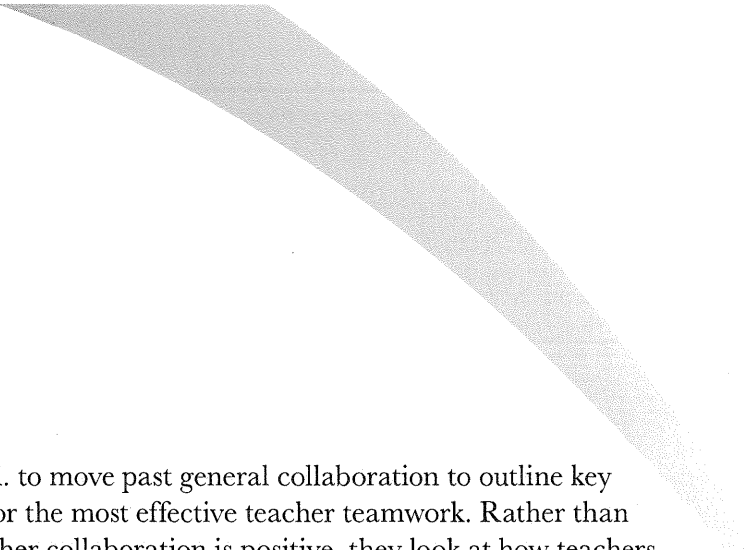


The research section provides a sample of core research articles that address the questions through several lenses—the impact on personal practice, the factors that are present in successful PLCs that last over time, and student outcomes on standardized tests. While our search for research studies uncovered hundreds of articles about the varying levels of effectiveness of professional learning communities, the articles presented here were chosen for the breadth of focus that they represented, from pure theory to deep practice. These five articles are exemplary in that they crystallize the key principles in effective learning communities, which we discuss later. Taken together the articles provide a substantial evidence-based argument for the power of collaborative communities to improve teaching and learning.

In Talbert and McLaughlin, we open with a theoretical discussion about the value of collaboration, and acknowledge that not everyone has bought into the idea that collaboration is a good thing in teaching. Talbert and McLaughlin find that rather than impeding “artisan” teachers from practicing their craft, professional learning communities provide the forum for these artisans to test and refine their theories in a supported environment. The authors also discuss the different perceptions of teachers in both weak and strong communities, and conclude that teachers in weak communities prefer isolation to the poor support of their fellow community members, while teachers in strong communities tend to feel that they have the power to help every student achieve because they are empowered by the knowledge and support of their colleagues.

Stoll, et al. synthesize findings about the influences of teacher professional learning from an extensive list of studies done around the globe. Through these studies, the authors outline the common elements of professional learning communities, impediments to success, and the power of outside partnerships to strengthen the communities. Then we learn about the positive effects learning teams can have on teaching practice and student learning in effective communities.

Goddard, et al. set out to test the hypothesis that teacher collaboration has a positive effect on teaching and learning, without limiting the definition of collaboration to a specific prescriptive form of teaming. The authors used survey data from a large urban district to determine whether teachers who report having more opportunities for collaboration have more or less successful students. Indeed, those teachers reporting more teacher collaboration in their schools taught in schools with higher student scores on standardized tests. The study confirms that collaboration has an effect without pinpointing one particular model as most effective.



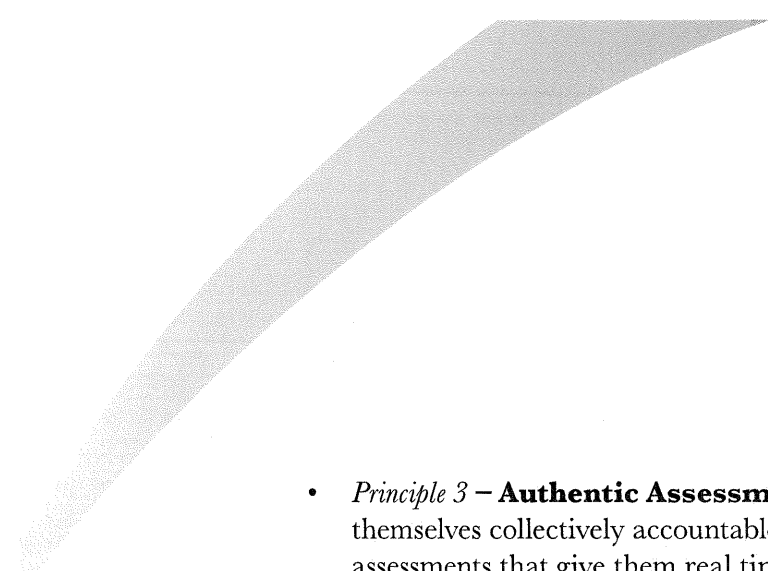
Next we look to Gallimore, et al. to move past general collaboration to outline key factors that should be in place for the most effective teacher teamwork. Rather than taking for granted that any teacher collaboration is positive, they look at how teachers can be intentional about their collaborative learning in order to change their instructional practice. The program they evaluated was put into operation in two phases to improve fidelity of implementation and effectiveness.

Finally, Ermeling takes an in-depth look at one team of high school teachers that are using reflective inquiry to examine and change their practices. In this study, it should be noted that the researcher did not see dramatic effects in the first year of implementation. Instead, professional learning takes time to build from discussion of theory and student data into deep changes in classroom practices.

Equally powerful are the case studies written by skilled practitioners who are working today in PLCs in schools around the country. They share “knowledge in practice” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1996) that puts a face on the daily work of teachers empowered to work together on deepening their own understanding of their students learning and how it can be enhanced. The teachers in each of these schools have redefined their roles as they have become members of a professional community composed of accomplished teachers, novice and student teachers, and teacher coaches. They work together to develop and refine a collectively built body of teaching knowledge and skills that can be customized to meet each student’s learning needs. Each case study tells the story of the process of developing learning teams, overcoming obstacles, and ultimately changing teaching to improve learning and student achievement through collaborative work.

Though they are grounded into two levels of inquiry, common across both the case studies and the research reports are key principles of effective learning communities. Research provides evidence of the effectiveness of these elements, while the case studies confirm that evidence from the perspective of those doing the work on the ground and in the schools. The principles of success are:

- **Principle 1 – Shared Values & Goals:** The team should have a shared vision of the capabilities of students and teachers. They should also clearly identify a problem around which the learning team can come together, with an ultimate goal of improving student learning.
- **Principle 2 – Collective Responsibility:** Team members should have shared and appropriately differentiated responsibilities based on their experience and knowledge levels. There should be a mutual accountability for student achievement among all members of the learning team.

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- *Principle 3 – Authentic Assessment:* Teachers in the community should hold themselves collectively accountable for improving student achievement, by using assessments that give them real time feedback on student learning and teaching effectiveness. These assessments are valued – not because they are linked to high-stakes consequences – but because they are essential tools to improve learning.
 - *Principle 4 – Self-Directed Reflection:* Teams should establish a feedback loop of goal-setting, planning, standards, and evaluation, driven by the needs of both teachers and students.
 - *Principle 5 – Stable Settings:* The best teams cannot function within a dysfunctional school. Effective teams require dedicated time and space for their collaborative work to take place. This requires the support and, occasionally, positive pressure from school leadership.
 - *Principle 6 – Strong Leadership Support:* Successful teams are supported by their school leaders who build a climate of openness and trust in the school, empower teams to make decisions based on student needs, and apply appropriate pressure to perform.

In the following articles, we note where our outline of these principles intersects with the guiding frameworks and concepts used by the researchers and case study teachers and principals.

A growing number of education leaders across the country are increasingly committed to moving away from No Child Left Behind's reliance on single standardized assessments to more innovative approaches to hold themselves collectively and professionally accountable for student learning. Overall, the studies show us that when teachers are given the time and tools to collaborate they become life-long learners, their instructional practice improves, and they are ultimately able to increase student achievement far beyond what any of them could accomplish alone.